DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 180 941 SP 014 815

AUTHOR	Henderson, Robert
TITLE	Organizing Effective Networks.
SPONS AGENCY	New England Teacher Corps Network, Portsmouth, N.H.
PUB DATE	77
NOTE	13p.
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrative Organization: Ancillary Services: *Cooperative Planning: *Delivery Systems: Educational Resources: Governance: Information Dissemination: *Information Networks: *Organizational Development
IDENTIFIERS	Teacher Corps

ABSTRACT

An account is given of creating and implementing an information network for the Teacher Corps projects. The purpose and function of a network is described, and the obstacles to the development of this network are discussed. The early network development strategies are cited and, in conclusion, a summary is given of what was learned by the network developers about fundamental considerations necessary to successful development of such an organization. (JD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED180941

1977

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ORGANIZING EFFECTIVE NETWORKS

by Robert Henderson

INTRODUCTION

The chief aim of the Teacher Corps is to facilitate collaboration among public schools and universities to improve educational opportunities for low income students. The focus of this collaboration is the use of Teacher Corps/university/school resources to provide inservice training to teachers. Throughout its history Teacher Corps has sought continually to expand the circle of collaboration, on the project level, to include all groups who played a significant role in the education of low income students. Consequently, since its inception in 1965, numerous program amendments and legislative changes have been made to systemically involve parents, community residents, school principals, deans of education and others in the change programs of Teacher Corps projects. Teacher Corps invested heavily in collaboration among these groups in the hope that the synergy of their combined efforts would increase the impact of the projects on the educational opportunities available in target schools. In effect, Teacher Corps was attempting to establish a series of networks, on the school level, which would continue to function after the cessation of federal funds. In terms of collaboration, Teacher Corps was attempting to develop a functional system of mutually beneficial relationships working toward the shared objective of improved educational opportunities.

Ironically, it was not until 1974 that Teacher Corps acted to create a system for collaboration among project directors and their projects,

SP014 815

the Teacher Corps networks. The aim of the networks was to facilitate information sharing and problem solving among projects to aid their development and effectiveness. The networks were governed by the project directors and were provided with funds and a staff to aid the administration of their affairs and the excution of their decision.

Prior to the creation of networks, no formal channels for sharing and collaboration among project directors existed. The irony of this circumstance was the large number of project directors who had developed skills resulting from previous Teacher Corps experience, and the equally large number of directors with no experience who were in need of those skills. Networks not only provided a vehicle for new people to exploit the experience of veterans, they also served as a means to achieve outcomes difficult for any director to achieve individually.

Since their creation, networks have produced numerous products through the organized collaboration of project directors. Alternative training designs, extensive documentation of effective models and practices, and a wide range of project, role groups, and director oriented services have resulted from these combined efforts. However, the productive and efficient collaboration which now characterizes most networks was only achieved after a long period of growth (sometimes painful) and consolodiation within each network. The active sense of ownership, responsibility, and committment to networking, now fairly common among directors, was slow to develop.

This chapter will examine the development of networks in Teacher Corps drawing on the experience of the New England network and others, and cite learnings about the organization and management of effective networks.

PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF A NETWORK

The Teacher Corps networks comprise what Sarason calls a "human resource network." It is an association of people with similar concerns and responsibilities who regard themselves and their projects as mutual resources for positive exploitation. The network seeks to maximize the degree of functional benefit achieved by each network member; to aid members in effecting the synergetic potential of network collaboration.

The network brings together people who have commanlity of purpose and diversity of skills, perspectives, and experience levels. This balance of unity and diversity is the basis of what Cohen and Lorentz call the "dynamic equilibrium: of Networking." On one hand, the network serves to help its members transcend the constraints of daily operation of their projects. The diversity of perspectives and experience helps them to see larger issues and concerns and address a wide range of issues more effectively. On the other hand, the efforts of the Network are meaningless unless they can be translated into action steps which aid the day to day operation of the projects.

The greater the diversity of experience and perspective, the more effective a Network can become. For this reason, one primary function of the Network is to maintain an open system stance; to solicit input and involvement from a wide range of others, (i.e., project members, teachers, community residents, deans, consultants, literature and so on). This openness not only increases the degree of needs responsiveness and knowledge base of Network activities, it also helps maintain a functional orientation in the thinking of the networkers. This orientation, in turn, helps to insure the selection and design of activities which will have a positive measurable impact on the daily operation of projects.

OBSTACLES TO NETWORK DEVELOPMENT

The primary obstacles to the development of networks centered on the questions: 1) who benefits - will the network be responsive and accountable to the needs of projects and directors?; 2) what are the costs - will involvement in the network require excessive amounts of time?; 3) can the benefits outweigh the costs - will the products of network involvement exceed the costs of involvement?

Although network collaboration makes immediate theoretical sense, project directors, their staffs, and their constituents (teachers, parents, and school administrators) each had operational agendas they were not eager to disrupt. When networks were established, the initial reaction of these groups ranged from the accusation that they represented a meaningless Washington "lay-on" to simple indifference. Very few showed excitement about the potential of networks to produce needed support services. Consequently, finding ways to demonstrate the reciprocal benefits of network involvement, develop trust among the participants, and facilitate the assumption of responsibility among the members was the first major test of the networks. Also, the networks did not have a clearly delineated mandate or goals statement. In other works, the first question: "What is the network and what is it suppose to do?", had no ready answer.

The concommitant effect of the time pressures directors faced at their projects, the absence of a specific mandate, and the fact that the network and its membership had been created by a powerful external force slowed the development of networks. First, Teacher Corps project directors were obligated to participate in the networks but did not immediately see the potential benefits of their participation. Second, there was active

questioning among directors of whether the network's resources would be put to purposes they determined or purposes dictated to them by Washington. Third, network executive secretaries, the chief administrators of networks (selected and directed by network boards of directors) were initially suspected of serving two masters, the networks and Washington. Some directors suspected that networks would be used, by Washington, to perform duties not in the projects' interest. Although those "duties" were never specifically defined, the suspicion alone created an obstacle to network development which had to be overcome. Fourth, some project directors saw networks only as a means to acquire resources for their projects and were not disposed to reciprocate by contributing their time, ideas, skills or experience.

These problems were primarially attributable to newness and the absence of input from project directors in the development of the networks. Project directors had no formal channels of communication or mutual assistance prior to the creation of networks. And, although there was a widely recognized need for a vehicle to facilitate collaboration and sharing among projects, the sudden appearance of networks was generally greeted with suspicion.

The New England Network was no exception. The early meetings of the board of directios were dominated by discussion of who the network belonged to, its purpose and capacity for service, defining the functions and accountability of the executive secretary, and developing an acceptable governance structure. During that period there were three major concerns among directors. First, that the network would only be use for purposes determined by the directors. Directors were concerned that the resources

of the network might be exploited by Teacher Corps/Washington to excute its agendas and would consequently lose its value to the projects it was supposed to serve. Second, that the executive secretary serve and be accountable only to the board of directors. Directors were suspicious that executive secretaries would be used to feedback information on the problems of specific projects, and that they would be asked to perform services not specifically related to network business. Third, that there was parity among the directors in decision making, access to resources, and access to services. And fourth, that the time directors spent away from their projects be productive of benefits for those projects.

Also, because of the newness of the network, integrating its support services in to the projects' normal operations was a priority concern. If the network's services were offered at the expense of local project efficiency, the benefits realized from those services would be at least partially deminished by the disruption of their offering.

EARLY NETWORK DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

The primary development concern in networking is facilitating the growth of trust and the assumption of responsibility among the members, so that the network can become productive and mutually beneficial. The initial steps taken by the New England network included: 1) designing a governance structure which defined the composition of the board of directors, the authority of the board and its individual members, and a process for decision-making; 2) defining the scope of work, authority, and accountability of the executive secretary; and 3) developing a process for the initial assessment of project needs to facilitate the design of programs

and services.

In designing the governance structure and developing programs and services the issue of concern is defining the networks real constituency. Designing an equitable governance structure is a fairly simple and straight forward matter. However decision-making and program design require the consideration of and input from all of the populations impacted. In Teacher Corps networks there are two constituencies. The first is the project directors, who, by virtue of their position, have a unique set of support and service needs not shared by other members of their projects. The second is those poeple who compose their projects and who represent the primary targets of much of the networks activity. In order for the network to be effective, increasing degrees of trust and a sense of mutual benefit must be developed among these populations too.

The development of this awareness is aided when the project members have a consistent and meaningful role in network program design and see the network taking steps to be responsive to the needs they identify. In New England, the network sought to provide this role in the following ways:

1. The initial assessment of project needs was conducted by the network executive secretary in a series of project visits. Each role group of each project was interviewed about their role, its demands, and its most critical support needs. The benefit of this exercise was two-fold. First, it provided role groups with an opportunity to discuss their needs and make recommendations of ways they could be accommodated. Second, they provided the

executive secretary with an opportunity to get to know the people in the projects and vice versa. These meetings provided a forum for the discussion of the network, its capacities and limitations, and the benefits of cross project collaboration among role groups faced with similar challenges. Also, the data collected from these meetings were summarized and presented to the board of directors for decision-making on program design.

2. As major areas of program development were defined, task forces composed of representatives from target role groups were established. These task forces were charged with the mission of developing and integrated sequence of program activity. Decision made by these task forces were presented as recommendations to the board of directors.
3. Documentation of activities, products, models and problems was disseminated through activity reports and through the network tabloid. The format of the reports and the tabloid was organized to provide relevant, useful information to all role groups.
4. Each year a conference entitled, "What Has Teacher Corps Taught Us" was held to facilitate product sharing and needs assessment for the coming year.

Through the vehicle of these strategies, the network gradually developed a reputation for being consistently responsive to the needs of project members. This reputation, in turn, facilitated confidence among the

members (both directors and role groups) and their desire to be involved in network activities. Also, at the end of each year, as old projects terminated and new ones were funded, the "track record" of the network facilitated the quick involvement of the new projects in network activity.

It is interesting to note that the last role group to seriously address its own development was the directors. In the first year of the network, their energies were primarilly directed to the provision of services to their projects. Although numerous sharing and problem solving activities were held for directors, it was not until a consistent and effective process for accommodating the needs of their projects was established that they turned serious attention to on-going development training for themselves. However, these activities did significantly contribute to the development of networking skills among the directors. As the network became increasingly effective, the directors began to integrate networking concerns (sharing information/skills, etc.) to increasing degrees.

LEARNINGS

Our experiences with networks indicate that certain considerations are fundamental to the effectiveness of this brand of collaboration.

1. Project directors must see the network as their agency, owned equally be each member. Although ultimately those who are most active may assume a greater share of informal ownership and influence, it is imperative that directors "buy into" the concept of networking and assume a functional responsibility for its direction.
2. The ownership issue also triggers the issue of turf. To

aid the function of the network and insure its freedom from dominance by a single project, the network should be located at a neutral site. As Cohen and Lorentz have stated, "The setting of the network should always be on "neutral" ground." They further state, "A separate office, with an ability to keep doors open to all, is the appropriate base for housing the coordinator and administering the network." Our experience has demonstrated that this separation helps the network belong to everyone and no one. The resulting independence facilitates the leadership function of the network office.

3. The network must function in concert with the work flow of projects. If the network services are offered at the expense of local project efficiency, the benefits realized from those services would be deminished by the disruption of their offering.
4. The network must have flexible capacities. One primary advantage of networking is the ease of adopting new missions and tasks. A network must be able to bend its resources to enable it to respond to a range of ever changing needs and concerns. At the same time, it is improtant that a network adopt a central integrating principle(s) which can function as a mission statement(s) and guide the development of programs. The existence of such a principle(s) will help the network evolve with more order and less chaos.

5. The network participants and staff must develop committment to and skill in the networking process. As Cohen and Lorentz have stated, "A major objective of looking at Networks as process is to encourage individual expression, self and mutual help." Effective networking is characterized by the function of the networkers as both "givers" and "takers".
6. The network office must have the demonstrated technical capacities to "deliver the goods". A good "track record" generates confidence among the network members which, in turn, facilitates creative thinking, and high quality committment and involvement. Because the mechanism works, people use it and rely on it. If this confidence in capacity is absent, the scope, ambition, and impact of the network is sharply deminished. This confidence is especially important because the success of a network is largely dependent upon the degree to which its members perceive a potential for benefit.

CONCLUSION

Heretofore, Teacher Corps networks have been composed solely of two year cycle projects. These projects were fairly similar in structure, organization, and objectives. This year, the difference between the two year 12th Cycle projects and the five year '78 Series projects will present a major challenge to the networks and to the directors to capture, integrate, and capitalize on the difference between these two sets of projects.

One key to the success of this effort will lie in the networks' ability to transcend their structural differences, and in the directors' ability to apply appropriate management technologies to their direction. Although the projects will be different in kind, they will not be different in character. That is, the major aims and functions of the two sets of projects will be parallel. This parallelism will serve to maintain the key balance described earlier: commonality of purpose and diversity of means, perspective, and experience levels. If this balance can be established it will reslult in a increase achievement of outcomes in projects.